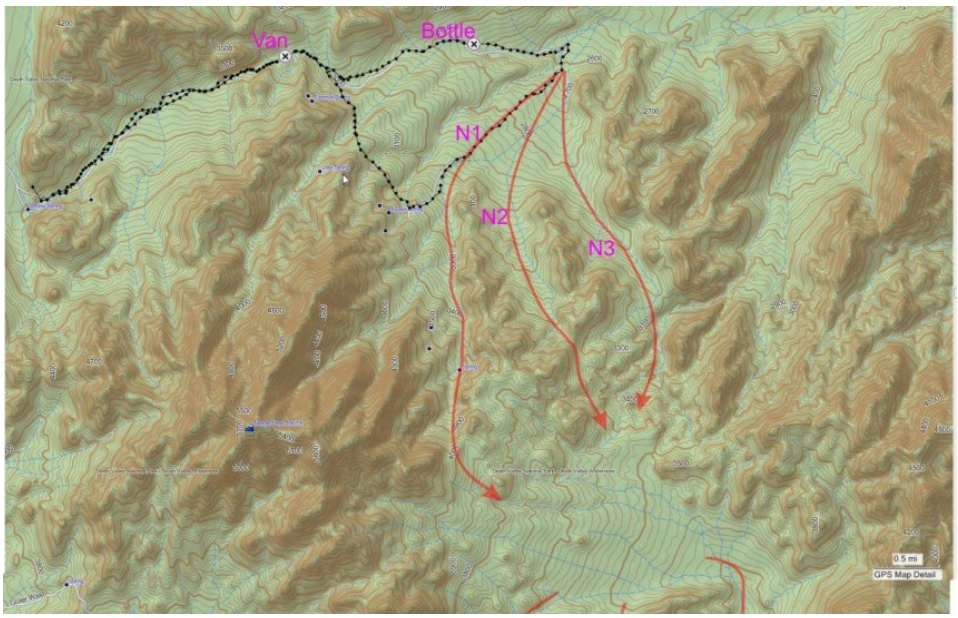
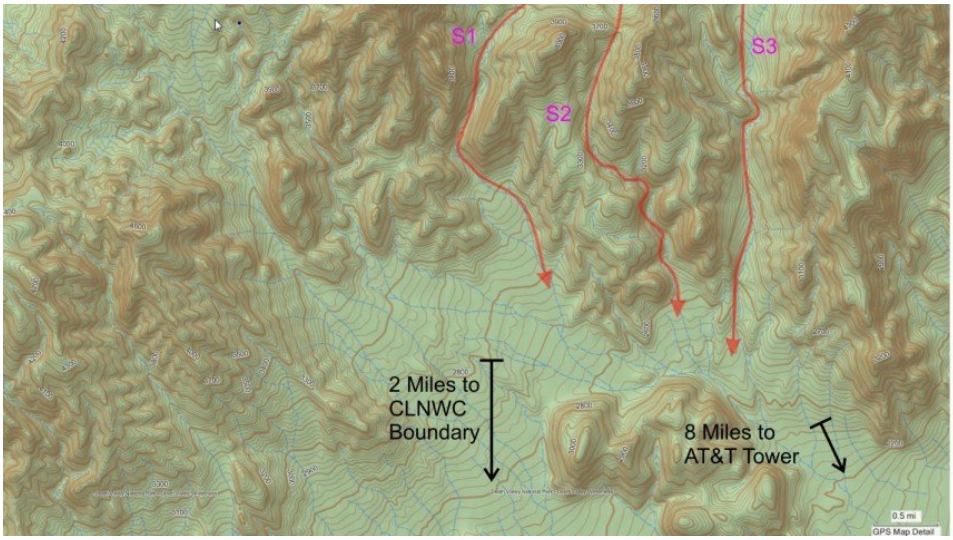
OtherHand

Up the N3 canyon, 4/15/2010

As the season progressed, I knew it would soon be too warm in the area to safely explore it, but there was still a mystery to be solved. What happened to the kids, and just how did the Germans get to the location they ended up?

I knew that two of the possible routes into the upper area, what I had taken to calling N1 and N2, had been thoroughly explored and no evidence of the German's passage had been found. But N3 was supposed to have been covered by the team that ended up getting sick, lost and requiring assistance during the big search, so it never really was examined carefully. This seemed like a good candidate for a last exploration before warmer temperatures arrived and the weather door slammed shut. I enlisted one of my RMRU team mates, Pete Carlson to join in the fun. Pete has a sick idea of what's fun. The idea was to arrive at the Anvil Canyon trailhead and spend the night, hike in and spend the night near the head of N3, then exit the area and return home.



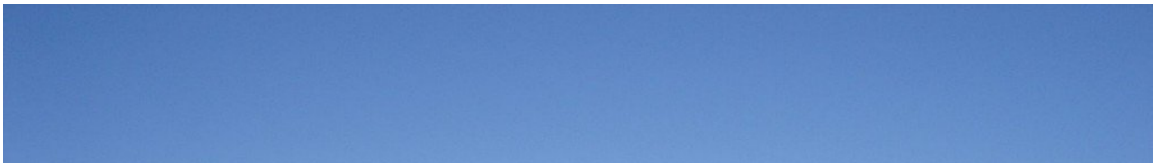


Possible routes south of Anvil Canyon (T. Mahood)

Pete and I got to the trailhead for Anvil Canyon on the evening of Thursday April 15th and spent the night there. We got up early and managed to get started down the trail about 6:45 AM on Friday morning. Since there was no water on this route, we carried about 8 or 9 liters each. The idea was that we would each leave a couple liters at the junction of Anvil Canyon and N3 for pick up on the return the next day. We wanted to minimize our water load as we climbed the N3 canyon, as it was pretty heavy.

We were very fortunate to have tuned into the burro way of thinking and were able to stay almost entirely on well defined burro trails past the van site, past the bottle bush, all the way to the N3 junction. This saved us a lot of energy and we made excellent time. I captured the track on my GPS to use on the way out. Since it was a good (or rather bad) uphill slog, knowing where the burro trails were would help a lot, so the GPS track was valuable information.

One change I noticed from previous trips was an abundance of Spring vegetation. This included vast swaths of yellow wildflowers. While scenic, they not only obscured the ground when searching, they made the burro trails much harder to follow. Still, the flowers were pretty spectacular.



Me, way too many flowers and N3 (P. Carlson)

By 9:30 AM we had already turned south up N3 and cached our water. Looking over the area, it seemed like N3 would be an obvious choice for someone wanting to head south. The slope is fairly gentle, and it gives the appearance of reaching a crest in the distance. N1 and N2 just aren't as obvious, and someone wouldn't know they are there without a topo map. As we headed up N3, we came upon a number of small cliff faces on the east side which we checked out. In the morning they would have provided shade and we were hoping to find a dropped fluid container. While N3 is fairly wide, the wash in it is not large and the most desirable route is pretty plain to see. Pete and I moved up along both sides of this obvious route. The only thing we came across was a fragment of bone that seemed to be too large to be anything but burro. We also could clearly see the green clump of trees at Squaw Spring off to the west.

The travel up N3 was turning out to be very pleasant, and I began to see how the Germans could have made it in as far as they did. This route was much easier than any other I had been on.

Looking south up N3, a very nice route (T. Mahood)

I knew that about 2.2 miles up N3 there was a drop off into another canyon that drained the upper alluvial area down into Anvil Canyon further east. I had identified that as a possible camp site for this adventure, as it was in the main area we wanted to search. I had also spotted another potential camp site a further 0.4 miles south, if we had energy to get that far.

As we gained the head of N3 the canyon widened and flattened, and we could see the drop off coming up. We got to the edge at 11 AM. It was an OMG! moment. The drop down into the canyon below seemed huge! Worse than that, the terrain to the south was a maze of colorful mud hills cut by deep ravines. We knew, as happy possessors of a USGS topo map, that the wash below us would eventually lead to the upper alluvial fan. But everything our eyes told us ran counter to that. It looked like it was just vanishing off into the mountain to the east. It seemed inconceivable that an inexperienced party, tired and with two children would risk a descent into this canyon below with no apparent hope of it continuing south.

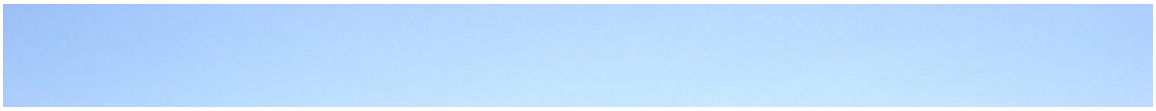
At the N3 drop off - The picture really doesn't do it justice! (T. Mahood)

So we were more than happy to bypass it and continue south to our planned campsite. Then we saw the shineys. Something was glittering below in the wash, like glass. Unable to resolve what it was with binoculars, it meant a personal visit to the bottom was necessary. So we dropped our packs on the rim and started down.

When we reached the bottom, we were very surprised. The depth of the canyon was something of an optical illusion. Not bad at all. But without actually doing the descent, we would not have known. The shineys turned out to be very large flakes of a calcite-like crystal, which were littering the wash. Spoofed again.

Returning back up to our packs, we proceeded south via the most logical route around the convoluted hills. It's not like there were a lot of options. We found if we stayed a bit to the west, we could remain out of the mud hill area, although we were still forced to up and down small ravines. If this was indeed the route the Germans had taken, it clearly would have turned into a nightmare.

We reached our intended campsite, on a saddle above the mud hills, around Noon. It was becoming obvious to us that even though the area we had intended to search when drawn on a map was somewhat large, the crazy terrain was limiting potential through routes to only a few areas. We felt that the only two realistic routes to the south was a higher one to the west (which we were currently on), or along a well defined wash through the mud hills. We decided to drop our packs at the camp site and continue south with minimal supplies along the higher route, then return to the camp via the mud hills.



Pete and the crazy mud hill terrain in the background (T. Mahood)

Losing the heavy, water-laden packs made travel much easier and we quickly reached the northerly edge of the upper alluvial fan. We could see the knoll which became the final resting spot for the Germans about 1.1 miles away, almost directly south. We turned easterly and began to drop down into what we observed to be the best choice of washes for returning back toward our camp area.

At that point we spotted something unexpected. In the wash below us was an odd looking rock pile with a post in it. My first thought was a mining claim, but I had never heard of any mining activity in the area. And old claim markers are usually just rock cairns. Could it be a ….grave?? Not knowing we quickly dropped down for a closer look. The post was an old 4″ by 4″ wood post, with the remains of red paint around the top area. It was set fairly well into the soil, with large rocks around it. The rocks weren't holding it up, the soil was. In the slope behind it, there appeared to be evidence of a small prospect, so it looked like it was some sort of prospect marker. Set on the rock pile was an empty amber Busch beer bottle, which didn't look all that old. Was the bottle left by the Germans?

The mysterious post (T. Mahood)

The post and bottle (T. Mahood)

No, it wasn't. Post-trip examination of the symbols and markings on the bottom of the bottle showed that it was manufactured by the Thatcher Manufacturing Company. The company ceased operations in 1985, thus the bottle had to be older than 1985. So while the marker appears odd, it must be associated with some type of mining activity. We did come across a few very old rusted cans and a couple of wood pieces nearby, so there may have been a campsite there prior to the area becoming part of the Death Valley NP in 1994.

Leaving the mystery post, Pete and I continued down the colorful washes until we returned to the area beneath our camp site. At one point we passed what we called the "Psychotic Rattlesnake" . Now we never exactly saw this sucker, we were at least a hundred feet away (a good distance when around Rattlesnakes!). Yet this guy set off his rattle like he was on speed, and wouldn't shut up until we were way down the canyon.

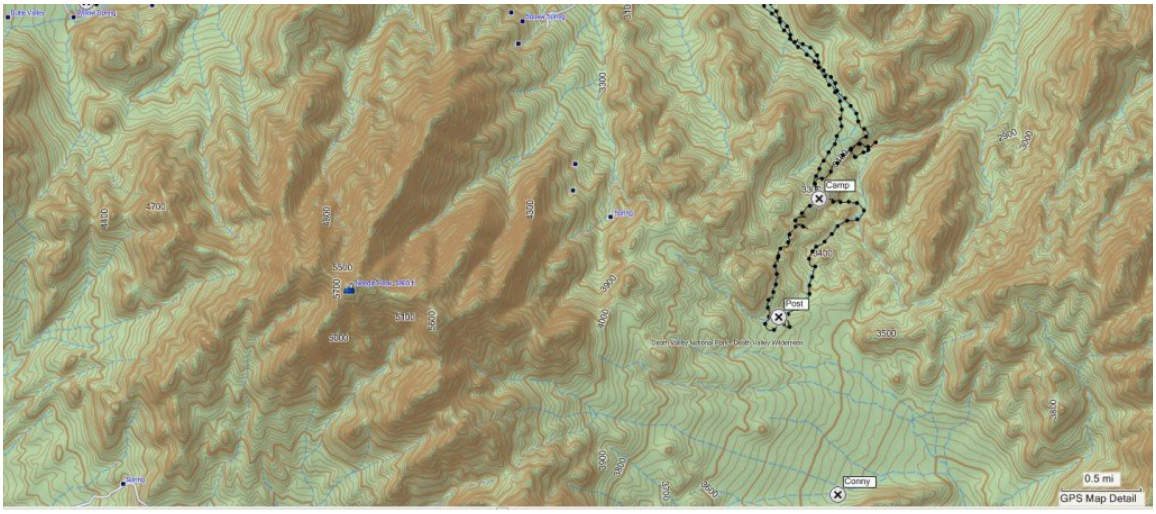
After a painful, but short, climb we reached our gear around 2:30 PM. We were now faced with the situation of having covered most of the area we felt needed to be covered, yet it

was still early in the day. It was going to be a long time until nightfall. After a bit of discussion, we decided we had enough energy left to make it back out to the truck before nightfall. Part of our optimism was having the burro trails mapped out in my GPS, which would save a lot of energy on the return. So after shoveling in more food and guzzling down our now abundant water, back north we headed.

Even though we were descending, the temperature had gone up and we were now in the heat of the day. It was probably in the mid-80s. Since we no longer needed to stop by our water cache at the Anvil Canyon/N3 junction, we were able to veer to the NW directly to Anvil Canyon and save some distance. Connecting back to the burro trails along Anvil Canyon really saved our bacon, as we were both pretty beat. We arrived back at the truck just before 6 PM, probably more dead than alive. It looks like the total distance for the day was 19 miles, most of which was with a full pack. Not a good idea, but then so many of my experiences in this area have turned out not to be good ideas. After cleaning up a bit, we made it back to the main valley floor just as it was getting dark and blasted off for home.

After having hiked the N3 route and taking in the topography, I think it's most probable the Germans used N3 to head south. From the perspective of Anvil Canyon it appears an obvious choice, and is the route you would see from the vantage point of the bottle bush. It's not until you are over 2 miles in and heavily committed to the choice that you discover about a mile and a half of mud hill hell awaits. But somehow the Germans made it through that, since we know where they ended up. There probably isn't much benefit in additional searching in the N3 area as Pete and I covered it fairly well.

About a month later, in the first week of May, 2010, I received a call from Deputy Winkler with some good news. Further forensic work was able to find some viable DNA deep in one of the recovered bones. They were able to match that DNA to Egbert with a very high level of confidence. Unfortunately no further DNA progress had been made on the female skeletal remains, and no evidence of child bones had yet been found. They were still out there, somewhere.



N3 hike GPS tracks, 4/15/2010 (T. Mahood)

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